Extracts from **‘Polycultural’ capital and educational achievement among NZ-born Pacific peoples** Karlo Mila-Schaaf & Elizabeth Robinson (2010) Mai Review (1).

***What about zebras who climb trees?***

Paea Wolfgramm, an award winning Tongan journalist wrote an article in SPACIFIK Magazine (2007, p. 12) titled “What about the zebras who climb trees?” In this article, Wolfgramm wrote about attending a Pacific education lecture, whereby the lecturer described the New Zealand schooling system as a tree. This education specialist went on to describe different ethnic groups trying to climb the tree. Some were monkeys; some were zebras, and a range of other animals. The point the lecturer made was that some animals were designed to climb trees whereas others—such as zebras—were not. This education lecturer likened Pacific peoples to zebras who were not designed to climb trees… Wolfgramm referred to the small proportion of zebras who do manage to climb to the top of the tree. He writes: “I thought quietly. Why don’t we look at the how those ‘zebras’ did it?” (2007, p. 12)

*Mila-Schaaf and Robinson investigated which cultural variables might be associated with better educational outcomes, using the Youth2000 survey, in which 9,567 NZ secondary students participated. Just over 1,100 students identified with one or more Pacific ethnic groups.*

***Youth2000 survey***

*The impact of socio-economic variables*

Considerable socio-economic disadvantage among Pacific students was evident. Approximately one third (36%) of Pacific participants (were) … classified as ‘relatively prosperous’…Those Pacific students who met the relatively prosperous criteria, compared with those who did were more likely to report “trying hard” at school. They were also approximately 85% more likely to report doing well at school.

*Pacific language*

The findings show that half (49.8%) of all Pacific students reported speaking their own Pacific language at ‘an average or better’ level, with slightly more (56.8%) reporting they could understand their own Pacific language at an ‘average or better’ level. Results showed that those who spoke their Pacific language were a third more likely to report “usually trying hard” at school.

*Ethnic pride and placing importance on ethnic values*

Results showed that being proud of Pacific ethnic identity and placing importance on Pacific ethnic values was associated with being twice as likely to report doing well at school compared with those who reported no pride or continued importance in values. Pride and importance of Pacific values was also associated with students being one and a half times more likely to have plans for post school activities (either ‘ further training’ or ‘getting a job’).

*Feeling accepted*

The vast majority of Pacific participants (87%) reported that they felt accepted by members of their own ethnic group. However, in response to … “Do you feel accepted by other people?” approximately half of Pacific participants (52%) responded in the affirmative. Reporting ‘feeling accepted’ in response to both questions was associated with being one and half times more likely to (usually or always) try hard at school. Those that felt accepted were also two and a half times more likely to report doing well at school.

*Summary of the quantitative results*

Alongside socio-economic factors, the … results indicate the importance of having access to Pacific cultural capital: speaking Pacific languages, feeling accepted by other Pacific peoples and others, taking pride in Pacific identities and continuing to place importance on Pacific values. These were all associated with better educational outcomes. Neglect of Pacific cultural capital—allowing Pacific knowledge traditions to deteriorate and failing to sustain Pacific languages and cultural values—appeared to be associated with disadvantageous educational outcomes.

*Mila-Schaaf and Robinson then interviewed 14 second generation high achieving Pacific individuals to find out about their educational journeys and life experiences. The majority of this sample consisted of university educated professionals who maintained strong ties to Pacific communities.*

***Second generation stories***

Tama said: “Education to me is—was—a silver bullet.” University was seen as key to mobility. The sons and daughters of Pacific migrants who were interviewed told stories of exceptionally high expectations, of parental sacrifices and of being encouraged to do well at school. As Tama said: “Going to university was tattooed on my forehead at birth, I think: if I be honest.” As another participant, Simone, explained:

*I think for me it’s been the first everything, being the first person in the family to go to university, and being the first to actually go out there and face those challenges. And I mean even going to university! Having no idea about, you know…. You know I just followed their dreams and just floundered around and finally found my way…. That whole journey I think is a process of self discovery but also a process of educating my parents. And I suppose other peoples’ parents, about what is really involved in tertiary education….*

Despite beginning with relatively limited relevant ‘mainstream’ cultural and social capital to draw from, the second generation participants I interviewed had navigated dominant social spaces and accrued cultural, social, symbolic and economic forms of capital associated with those spaces. Their success could be attributed to many different elements; in particular, supportive and ambitious families who were strongly driven by the migrant dream. In many cases, humble financial beginnings, parental sacrifices…and experiences of adversity were able to be ‘turned around’ by these participants and realised as motivational drivers. These motivational discourses starkly contrasted to ideas participants had to face about Pacific peoples and poor achievement in dominant social spaces. As Pita explains:

*There were only two of us at uni [laughter] from our school, which says a lot you know. There were not many of us at all. And you weren’t really expected to succeed and I didn’t get a good start either. I didn’t get a heads-up from the Pacific Liaison person there. I put English down as my subject and they said, ‘Oh don’t do that it’s too hard for you’ and that was a subject I was relatively decent at, you know.*

Tiare talked about her dream to train as a nurse:

*When I went to see my careers guidance counsellor when I was about 13, she said, “Oh no you should just stick to home economics and typing.”*

At the time, Tiare accepted the limits set by the careers advisor. However, later as an adult she attended university. As a professional who now works with young people, she looks back at that incident saying, “It is a story I reflect on… I’m not blaming anyone but that certainly was not very encouraging.”

It is argued here that speaking Pacific languages, feeling pride in Pacific identities, placing importance on Pacific values and acceptance by other Pacific peoples are forms of Pacific cultural capital. They are non-financial assets, skills, knowledge which have been acquired over time and are associated with forms of power, status and/or advantage.

The participants I interviewed talked of being exposed to both Western-oriented New Zealand social spaces and Pacific social spaces. Their experiences were significantly shaped by enduring exposure to New Zealand society or social spaces and the stigmata of their effort to acquire capital in these spaces. It was clear that many of those interviewed had gained considerable Palangi cultural capital. Yet they also operated in spaces which were organised in alignment with the social structures of Pacific societies of origin and where capital was configured quite differently.

Ongoing exposure to more than one culture is regularly associated with being torn between conflicting cultures … While this is accepted as valid for some, it did not fit the cultural experiences described by many of the participants I interviewed… Bill alluded to developing the skills to fit into and navigate multiple spaces. He said:

*It means that I can dip in and out of things very easily and I can have a lot more choices. So I’m able to be comfortable, very comfortable in a Pacific environment however you define it. I’m very comfortable in a European environment, however you define it. I’m very comfortable in an upper socio economic, I am just able to be comfortable and at the same time I am able to be referencing - so I can get white peoples’ jokes because white people do have a form of humour. I can get brown peoples’ jokes because brown people have their own sense of humour. I think that makes me culturally literate.*

Polycultural capital is associated here with cross-cultural resources, knowledge, skills and agency. It is also associated with agency to draw purposively and strategically from more than one cultural way of knowing and interpreting the world. This strategic way of operating interculturally could not be accurately characterized in terms of cultural loss … or marginalization and was described by many participants as preferable to monocultural alternatives.